) promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which here in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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REDISCOVERING GOD'S EARTH

By Bishop William C. Martin*

Long ago a man was writing one of the songs of Israel -- we call it the 104th Psalm. He was telling about the blessings which God had given to His people. Among other things he said, "The earth is full of Thy riches." He did not know the full meaning of his own words; nor do we yet understand all that they imply. But we do know that all over America there is a rediscovery of the alluring attraction of country life. Many people who have spent all their days in the city have found that they have an inherent affinity for life in the open spaces. They have found a real thrill in digging in the earth and in watching plants and animals grow. There is something about the change of seasons, the falling snow, the green tidal wave of spring, the passionate haste of summer to bring her crops to maturity, and the gold of an autumn harvest that answers to an inner need which they have long felt but only recently have recognized for what it really is. You have no doubt noticed this trend in American life as it is reflected in the wide popularity of books and magazines and motion pictures which deal with themes that are rooted in the soil.

This "back to the land" movement is being sponsored by some of the great industries in America. There is a growing conviction among many industrial leaders that decentralization is a wise policy. These men are discovering that, with modern transportation, it is possible for factory workers to be located on small plots of ground which are big enough for a garden, a chicken yard, and a place for a cow to feed. With the shortened hours in the factory, ample time remains for the worker to take care of his small farm. The spirit of independence which this arrangement makes possible not only lifts the quality of work at the factory but it provides an economic buttress against the day when the factory may be temporarily closed.

A PROBLEM OF NATIONAL PROPORTIONS

Federal and state governments are giving major consideration to economic policies which are aimed at the stabilization of farm life. There has

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* An address over the Columbia Church of the air, July 27, 1947, just prior to the National Methodist Rural Life Conference.
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been wide disagreement as to the ultimate effectiveness of some of these measures but there can be no doubt that the welfare of the man on the soil and his family will continue to be one of the primary governmental aims during the years ahead. Thoughtful Americans who are concerned about the welfare of the nation are convinced that it is no more possible to maintain a well-ordered economic and social life on the basis of a discouraged and demoralized agriculture than it is for a farmer to get a good crop from an eroded hillside.

"Cities Are Abnormal." In a book under this title, edited by Elmer T. Peterson, twelve nationally known leaders in the fields of journalism, education, economics, and religion have established a fact which many of us have for a long time believed to be true. From the various angles of our American life, they have shown that our cities have grown to their present proportions in almost utter disregard of the welfare of the people who live in them. They are largely the product of an industrialized system which is more concerned with profits than it is with people. We cannot believe that it is the will of a just God that little children should grow up in the slums of a modern city. And now comes the threat of atomic warfare pointing its finger at these concentrated centers of population and saying to them with the remorselessness of doom, "You will either scatter out over a wider area or live under the constant peril of destruction."

An important element in this movement toward the open country is the fact that people are finding something more than economic security. They are discovering that life has a way of becoming artificial and unsatisfying when it is too far removed from mother earth. There is a sense of wholesome reality that comes from close association with the elemental sources of life. Something of the energizing power that throbs through the universe is made available to the man who feels the warmth of the sunshine on his body and the crunch of the life-giving soil under his feet. It is not surprising that such a large proportion of the world's great pioneers in the field of thought have come from close association with the land. It was my privilege recently to spend a day on Mr. Louis Bromfield's farm in central Ohio -- the farm he writes about in "Pleasant Valley." Here is the example of a man in whose heart a longing for his native soil held its place through all of his wanderings in foreign lands. He and his helpers have demonstrated that by proper methods, neglected and eroded farm land can be restored. They have also shown that life in the country, far removed from the smells and noises of the city can be rich in its attractiveness. There is a temptation to say, "Anybody could do this if he had enough money," but Mr. Bromfield maintains that he has done nothing on his farm which is not in reach of the average farmer although he does admit that ample resources have enabled him to accelerate some of the processes of soil restoration.

THE CONCERN OF THE CHURCH

What is the relation of the Church to this movement toward the land? In the first place, it is the business of the Church to give the fullest possible encouragement to its development. It must be acknowledged, with a sense of shame, that the Church has been unpardonably slow in recognizing its responsibility to the people who live in rural territory. There has been, for many years, a disposition to take the country for granted. In spite of the fact that the most reliable source of increase in our population has been the families in the open country and the small towns and that an overwhelming majority of the leadership in church life, both clerical and lay, has come from this part of America, the Church has been guilty of gross neglect of her ministry to this field. Hundreds of rural churches have been closed, not because the people had moved away but because it was no longer convenient to provide pastoral oversight. Until quite recently it was difficult to persuade capable and energetic young ministers who

had secured full theological training to remain in the country. It was generally regarded as a mark of failure if a man did not find his way into a city pulpit after a reasonable apprenticeship in the country or small town. Ministers who conformed to this idea of advancement have frequently been a liability rather than an asset to a country parish. They have revealed, in various ways, their belief that young people who are eager to succeed will naturally turn toward the city for the fulfilling of their ambitions. They have thus stimulated one of the most blighting tendencies which is afflicting country life today, namely, the desire of youth to leave the farm.

Fortunately, a new ideal of ministerial success is being developed. Some of the most capable and best trained young men who come from our seminaries are dedicating themselves to work in the rural districts. Instead of feeling apologetic or frustrated about being a country pastor, they feel a deep sense of pride in the fact that they are trained for the problems of helping country people to find the realities of an abundant life. Although they do not seek the role of experts in soil conservation or of consultants in animal husbandry, they know enough about sound methods of good farming to be on common ground with the graduates of Schools of Agriculture who are in their congregations. They recognize that their primary business is to help people to find God. . . .

In the second place, the Church has an obligation to interpret the deeper significance of farm life. The economic approach is not sufficient. Before the best ideals can be realized by those who till the land, there must be an underlying conviction that "The earth is the Lord's." Just now this nation is vitally concerned with the problem of soil erosion. The cost of the recent floods in terms of permanent loss to the land is beyond easy calculation. It is estimated that the lower Mississippi River at flood stage carries past any given point every sixty seconds a sufficient amount of top soil to cover a farm of 160 acres to the depth of A-grade Iowa land. With historic examples before us of civilizations that have perished because the top soil was eroded from the land, this country will certainly have the intelligence to protect its most essential asset by the proper kind of flood control. In the last analysis, however, it is not primarily a governmental problem. It is a question as to whether the farmer who cultivates the soil recognizes that, as a steward of God, he holds the land in sacred trust for future generations.

Finally, the Church must give to those who live in the open country the light of moral and spiritual direction. Nearly forty years ago President Theodore Roosevelt appointed a Commission to study and report to him on the condition of country life in America. As a part of its report this Commission said, "In the last analysis, the country problem is a moral problem and in the best development of the individual the great motives and results are religious and spiritual."(1) And so it is today. Life in the country which God meant to be clean and wholesome and productive can be boresome and stale and sordid. Let not city dweller suppose, for a moment, that life in the country is necessarily idyllic and free from the moral problems that afflict urban life. It is a disquieting fact that some of the foulest slums in America are in the country. Apart from the life-giving ideals of Christian culture, farm life can sag to the level of things coarse and brutal. In this day of destructive emotional tensions, people on the farm have no immunity. In fact, their lack of recreational releases and of community fellowship frequently results in personalities as completely warped as those which are produced by the grinding inhumanity of the city. The ministry of redemption which has been entrusted to the Christian Church must be given to the people who live in rural communities if we are to have a stable national life

and if the Kingdom of God is to come among men. The riches of God's gifts in nature must be matched by the devotion of men's lives.

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(1) With prophetic insight the members of the Commission on Country Life in their Report published forty years ago placed a secure foundation on which the present Rural Life Movement can build. This is illustrated by the following typical statements from that Report.

Excerpts from REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON COUNTRY LIFE

"The rural church must be more completely than now a social center. This means not so much a place for holding social gatherings, although this is legitimate and desirable, but a place whence constantly emanates influences that go to build up the moral and spiritual tone of the whole community. The country church of the future is to be held responsible for the great ideals of community life as well as of personal character.

"We must have a complete conception of the country pastorate. The country pastor must be a community leader. He must know the rural problems. He must have sympathy with rural ideals and aspirations. He must love the country. He must know country life, the difficulties that the farmer has to face in his business, some of the great scientific revelations made in behalf of agriculture, the great industrial forces at work for the making or the unmaking of the farmer, the fundamental social problems of the life of the open country.

"Consequently, the rural pastor must have special training for his work Ministerial colleges and theological seminaries should unite with agricultural colleges in this preparation of the country clergyman. There should be better financial support for the clergyman; in many country districts it is pitiably small. There is little incentive for a man to stay in a country parish, and yet this residence is just what must come about. Perhaps it will require an appeal to the heroic young men, but we must have more men going into the country pastorates not as a means of getting a foothold but as a permanent work. The clergyman has an excellent chance for leadership in the country. In some sections he is still the dominating personality. But everywhere he may become one of the great community leaders. He is the key to the country church problem."

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